

Sep-1988

Editor's Notebook: Are We Still #1?

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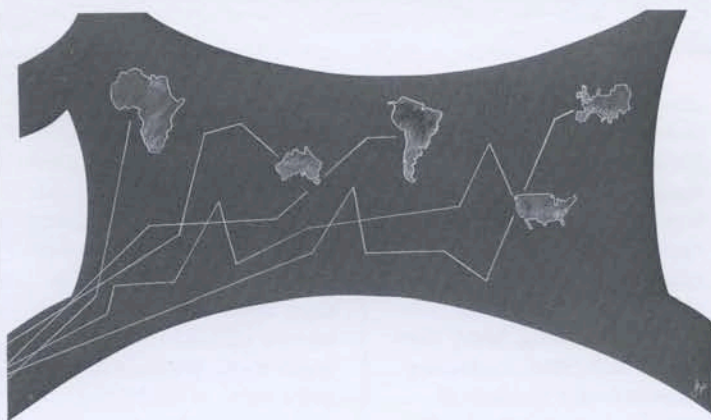
Recommended Citation

Kryzanek, Michael J. (1988). Editor's Notebook: Are We Still #1?. *Bridgewater Review*, 6(1), 1.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol6/iss1/3

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ARE WE STILL #1?

by Michael J. Kryzanek



Julie Polvina

The United States leads the world in college graduates, car owners, Nobel Prize-winners, and nuclear warheads. Americans buy more televisions, produce more corn, and publish more books than any other people. In category after category, from agriculture to industry to consumer consumption, the United States is at the top of the list; the premier developed country, or as Americans are quick to point out — #1.

The pride with which many Americans list their accomplishments, however, has been tempered somewhat by a number of disturbing new rankings. For example, the United States is 13th in infant mortality, 52nd in home ownership, and 19th in male life expectancy (9th for American women). Unfortunately, in terms of negative rankings the United States does lead the world in the importation and use of opiates and is #4 in reported rapes (only Lesotho, Botswana and the Bahamas lead the United States in this crime category).

The penchant for journalists, government officials and academicians to create lists and rank nations has now become something of a national pastime. As Americans we seem to demand a regular accounting of, to use a modern phrase, "who's hot and whose not." But where this accounting procedure has generally reinforced our perception that America is #1, the broad range of negative rankings that have appeared recently are beginning to call into question our claim to be the most developed nation on earth.

If posed today, the question of whether the United States was the most developed country would most likely meet

with an answer of "it depends," and in some instances a few brave critics would suggest that America is in a period of decline with little prospect of ever regaining its position as #1. There are a few (primarily in politics) who still hold fast to the view that this country retains its power, prosperity and popularity as it did in the post-World War II era, but even they are forced to admit that the world is changing and the United States is no longer the only nation to be reckoned with.

The appearance of negative rankings for the United States and the charge by some that, like Greece and Rome, this is a period of decline, can be viewed as a positive turn of events in that it has forced

both our leaders and the general public to examine more carefully what we value and what we consider to be the essential elements of a developed nation. There is no doubt that this country has provided its people with a strong defense against the dangers that lurk in the world and a prosperity unmatched in the history of mankind. Americans not only live well, but they feel secure and maintain that sense of optimism that is the trademark of our way of life.

But the negative rankings on health care, education, crime, and drugs, combined with the growth, inventiveness and prosperity of countries such as Japan, West Germany, and Taiwan has forced Americans to question

exactly what "developed" means and how they see the United States developing in the future. Americans are beginning to understand that the reason European children live longer at birth and read better is because their societies place more resources in these areas. Americans also now recognize that by spending only 2% of their GNP on defense the Japanese can allocate more resources toward research and development and modernize their industrial base. (The United States spends nearly 7% of its GNP on defense). And Americans are grudgingly coming to the realization that the social stability found both in Europe and the Far East is a factor not only of family ties and tradition, but of public policy decisions that strive to support those in need and create a climate of more equitable distribution of the nation's wealth.

Whether we like it or not, the United States is moving through a transition period in terms of its standing in the world community of nations. Despite the doomsayers, this country is not heading the way of Greece or Rome, but rather is in the process of adjusting to the realities of a world in which there are new #1's. The critical test for this country is not whether our ego can deal with being #2 or #3, but whether we can recognize that development means more than millionaires and nuclear warheads. A developed country is one that builds on its economic and military power and addresses a wide range of human problems. Without the foresight to recognize the importance of caring for the basic needs of its people, this nation may do more than slip in the rankings; it may forfeit its claim as developed. ■